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C O N F I D E N T I A L RANGOON 001555

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: EX-STRONGMAN NE WIN DIES WHILE UNDER DETENTION

Classified By: DCM: RON MCMULLEN FOR REASON 1.5(D)

1. (C) Summary: Ne Win is dead. The news has not yet hit the streets in Rangoon, but Ne Win's son told the DCM that reports of his father's death were true. Ne Win's death is likely to have little political impact. However, many in Burma will have trouble believing that "the old man" is finally gone. End Summary.

2. (C) Ne Win's son Ngwe Soe told DCM this afternoon that press reports that his father had died were true. Following up on press reports that Ne Win died at 7:30 this morning, December 5, DCM attempted to visit the residence where Ne Win and his daughter Sanda Win have reportedly been under house arrest since March. Authorities at the scene refused to comment on the reports but DCM encountered Ngwe Soe waiting by the police roadblock to the compound and apparently not allowed to enter. Ngwe Soe acknowledged that his father was dead but asked that the DCM not convey this to reporters who were waiting nearby. While we have no specific information on the cause of death, "the old man," as he is known here in Rangoon, has suffered from heart disease for years. In 2001, he reportedly received a pace-maker at a hospital in Singapore and he may have made at least one follow-up visit since that operation.

2. (U) Ne Win, who ruled Burma with an iron fist from the late 1950's until the late 1980's, has lived in virtual seclusion for most of the last 15 years. Although he is blamed for single-handedly destroying what had been a vibrant Burmese economy with his personal brand of pseudo-socialist policies, and for brutally crushing any political dissent, he was also grudgingly admired for his charismatic personality. He swept people into his cause and then, just as quickly, imprisoned, tortured, and killed those he perceived to be a possible threat. In the late 1980's when dire conditions from his economic policies created riots and protests, he retired from power and was succeeded by the State Law and Order Council (SLORC). In 1997, the SLORC renamed itself the State Peace and Development Committee (SPDC) and remains in power today.

3. (U) Ne Win was 91 years old and is survived by two wives, two daughters, two sons and two-step daughters from his four marriages. One daughter, Sanda Win, jealously guarded access to the father over the years and attempted to promote his legacy through her own three sons. Other family members, including ex-wives and other children, were reportedly allowed only infrequent "audiences" with Ne Win.

4. (U) Sanda's efforts to promote her sons as successors to the Ne Win throne came to an abrupt and unexpected halt earlier this year when the sons and their father were arrested on charges of high treason and economic improprieties. While the sons were roundly despised in Rangoon for their violent excesses and flagrant disregard for the law, few here believe that they had the brains or inclination to plot a coup attempt. Their arrests and subsequent sentences, and Sanda and Ne Win's house arrest, are generally believed to be an effort by SPDC Senior General Than Shwe, once a Ne Win underling, to wipe away any speculation that he was still under Ne Win's influence.

Comment

5. (C) We expect most ordinary Burmese will react to Ne Win's passing with glee but, unfortunately, it is unlikely that his death will have any effect on the current regime's political or economic policies. Senior General Than Shwe has made a pointed effort in recent years to distance the SPDC from Ne Win's legacy and put an end to rumors that Ne Win still wielded any power. Furthermore, Than Shwe, like Ne Win before him, has asserted his personal control through purges of powerful ministers and military members. Of the original 19 SLORC members only three - Than Shwe, Maung Aye, and Khin Nyunt - remain, and Than Shwe's authority is clearly unchallenged.

Martinez